REMEMBER W. TERRACE 3/29/81

TRINITY - MID WEEK - noon
March 28, 1979
John ~~Job~~ 6:4-15

("The Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread, and after giving thanks to God, broke it and said, ("This is my body, which is for you; do this remembering me." ")

Whether Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, those words, or words very similar are among the more precious in our vocabulary. Across centuries and throughout Christendom today they are part of the Eucharist liturgy, the Institution of the Holy Sacrament, ~~the Sacrament of Communion~~. They are words best left uninterpreted, I have always felt; unexplained. They say what they mean, and mean what they say. But I've always wondered what the friends of Jesus thought about when they first heard them. What do you suppose came to mind around the table that night of the Last Supper, or later when they broke bread and remembered. ?

"Do this in remembrance of me." What we remember is ~~the~~ a mental image of him saying those words: the actual incident which turned out to be the last supper. His friends, however, didn't ~~know it was the last meal together~~. When he said: ("Do this remembering me") they must have thought about other times - other events - other occasions of eating together. see it that way..

Perhaps they thought about that day, that day none of them would ever forget. They had been traveling through Galilea, walking from village to village; stopping every time a crowd or small group gathered; stopping sometimes

to talk with individuals or to watch in fear and awe as Jesus healed the sick. Word had spread like wildfire; the crowds grew in size; it wasn't long before he was surrounded by people wherever he went; sick people mostly, poor, old, crippled, sad people. They had begun to clamor for his attention, to demand healing, to pull at his garments. There wasn't time or opportunity even to eat a meal together or to sit and rest and talk or simply reflect in the silence.

And so they had convinced him to climb in a small fishing vessel and sail across the Sea of Galilea. It had been a quiet voyage: but hot as only the bright sun shimmering on the ocean can be. When they ~~arrived at~~ approached the other side they were travel-weary, thirsty, hungry, hoping to find a place for a quiet meal and sleep. From a long distance out, however, they could see the people. Somehow the news that he was coming had preceeded them: people had begun to gather.

It was late in the day when they climbed out of the boat and waded ashore. The insistent pleas, the calls for help began immediately. And as he walked up into the hills around the sea a bit, the crowd followed and grew steadily. If memory served them correctly, he had asked Philip if they could possibly buy enough bread for the whole crowd. And Philip, poor Philip, had to answer that there wasn't nearly enough money in their meagre traveling treasury for that. Andrew, with not much of a sense of propriety or timeliness, in a totally off hand manner pointed to a little boy standing nearby and said, "there you are - that fellow's got some bread and fish." He was trying to be funny and fail-

"This is my body which is for you. Do this remembering me." That - that strange day is what they remembered when they broke bread together.

The story is in all four Gospel accounts: the only miracle of Jesus repeated in each book. To the writers and compilers of the New Testament this, obviously, was a very significant event. They wanted very much for the early church to remember it.

It is not fair to attribute its inclusion to the naivete, ignorance and scientific innocence of those first century compilers. Their sensitivities were as offended, I would submit, as ours are at the suggestion that five loaves and two fish became enough food to feed a crowd of several thousand. That sort of thing didn't happen normally and they knew it. The literary hesitance of the Gospel writer himself is curious. He has on his hands an event to capture the imagination of any creative writer. But he never mentions what happened. The story is told almost reluctantly: never once is the miraculous act described - just the fact of the people's hunger, the loaves and fish, and that everybody ate. It's almost as if the assertion is straining the writers credulity, even as he is writing it down.

Modern Western Christians bring to this story modern western sensibilities and the first thing we always ask is, "Did it really happen and how?" The New Testament works very hard not to hang any of its assertions about who Jesus was on his ability to perform miracles. But we continue to ask and wonder and speculate - as if it mattered, and as if

we could dismiss him and relax about the whole business of Christianity if somehow, someone could prove conclusively that he didn't walk on water. "Did it really happen?" is the wrong question, albeit our favorite. The right and only question is "What does it mean? What is God's word in it for me? What claim is it making on my life?"

May I suggest two meanings? The first has to do with the focus of our religion and the age-old dichotomy in religion between the sacred and holy, the spiritual and material, godly and worldly.

Jesus, I have to assume, had a number of alternatives as he confronted the hungry crowd at meal time. He could have told them to feed themselves. He could have chided them a bit for not planning ahead and having food with them. It has always struck me as curious that they were out wandering about at dinner time without a sandwich stowed away: but that tells you more about my priorities than about the Bible. He could also have suggested that the situation called for a bit of a fast. Their religion prescribed fasting once a year and the very pious among them probably fasted one or two days per week. Surely he could have suggested that it was in order to exercise a little self-denial and bypass dinner.

But he didn't. He dealt with their physical hunger: he fed them - adequately. He took their physical need for food as seriously as other more spiritual needs. In fact, he wouldn't have understood what we mean when we start

talking about physical as opposed to spiritual. Hebrew thought did not divide the human person into tight, clearly defined compartments. The later categories of body, mind and spirit, in traditional Hebrew thought are combined into a whole, and it is not really possible to pull one category away and discuss it apart from the others. There is a physical dimension to spiritual hunger in the Old Testament; and a spiritual dimension to physical need.

Happily, we seem to be rediscovering that ancient truth. All good medicine is wholistic medicine. We are not the sum of three or four different parts labeled soul, mind, body. We are a unity. But the Greeks, in whose language the New Testament was written, and in whose idiom the early Church thought, and under whose influence Christianity has lived for 20 Centuries, didn't see things that way at all.

In fact, the Greeks, happily divided all reality into two separate categories: the physical and the spiritual. The spiritual realm was the locus of the good: the physical was the vehicle of evil. Dualism is the correct philosophic label for it. And within its constructs the role of religion is to show the way to escape from the banal evils of physical existence. The Greeks gave the world a bad name, made physical needs suspect and saddled sexuality with a reputation from which it still hasn't recovered.

If you think religion is about the spirit and not the body, you're a bit of a dualist. If you think some jobs are holy and others unholy: that some places are sacred and

others secular. If you think sex is fun but a little suspect morally: if you can't imagine laughing in glee in church - you're a better Greek Dualist than Christian: your religion has very little to do with your life and you probably have a lot of trouble with this story about hungry people.

Jesus simply dealt with the needs of people. He didn't chose between their spiritual and physical needs. He simply, in love, reached out to meet their needs. There was no choice to be made.

How far we have strayed from that! We're still debating the validity of the Social Gospel - as if there were any other kind. We're still wondering whether the real job of the church is to feed the hungry or preach the Gospel - and the answer to both is yes: both, concurrently.

Helmut Thielicke wrote somewhere that even a Beethoven symphony doesn't sound good if you're shivering in the cold. The falseness of the dichotomy was caught one time by Charles Schultz in a Peanuts sequence. Snoopy is shivering in the cold, alone, miserable, hungry. He brightens as Charlie Brown approaches. But Charlie Brown passes by, looking at the unhappy dog and saying, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy."

And the writer of the Epistle of James asks simply, "If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit." (James 2:15-16)

The first meaning of this story then, is that God comes to us in our wholeness. He cares about us in our wholeness, not just the part we label religious. Jesus Christ came to redeem us - our time, our relationships, our values, even our physical needs. All of them - become means by which he loves us and calls us to full life.

The second meaning is that Jesus Christ offers something we need as profoundly as we need daily bread. We live in a time that thinks it doesn't believe that: a culture that thinks it has outgrown the need for faith: a life style that takes a bath in egotism and calls it self actualization. What Jesus Christ offers is something we will do anything to realize - love, grace, acceptance. Psychology knows how disparately we need to be loved and accepted for who we are: how, when deprived of that life becomes a hell of striving and grasping for it: how many of us drive ourselves twelve hours a day, seven days a week at tremendous cost to health and family - just to prove, perhaps only to ourselves, that we are acceptable, worthful.

Just as he fed the hungry that day long ago, so Jesus Christ offers to meet your deepest need and mine today. The Good News which he announced, taught, demonstrated and incarnated is that we are loved - loved of God; as we are, sometimes in spite of what we are. That he accepts us and bids us live in the joyful, freedom of that acceptance.

That is the best of all news. It is food - bread and wine: it is what we need more than anything else in life.

"This is my body broken for you. Do this remembering me," he said. And before that - ("I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry.")

So remember him - today - in bread broken at a friendly lunch, or alone in solitude, or with the shouts and interruptions of your children at dinner. Remember him as your needs are met - this Lord who loves you, and cares about you and feeds your hunger. Amen.

Prayer